Newspapers by ancestry
https://www.newspapers.com/image/161216794

Downloaded on Mar 25, 2024

Exile on Main Street

NICOLE PANTER

PATTI SMITH COMPLETE
Lyrics, Reflections & Notes for the Future
By Patti Smith
Anchor: 272 pp., $25 paper

Patti Smith saved my life. Not metaphorically, not in abstract, not figuratively, but directly and indisputably in the way that only a lonely, too-smart teenager imprisoned in the hostile environment of a small, isolated and hopelessly Lynyrd Skynyrd desert town can swear that her life has been saved by a distant ray of hope emanating from a culture hero out there who is actually speaking the unspeakable. Smith was that figure, the one who was living the life, putting it down on paper and sending enthusiastic reports back into the void, where fellow misfits waited, breathlessly, to hear more.

When I was a teenager—this was before Smith picked up a guitar—I knew and avidly followed Smith's writing in the seminal and irreverent rock publications Creem and Crawdaddy. Her very existence confirmed what I suspected: There were lives being lived for art and music and poetry's sake alone. Like her fellow rock writers Lester Bangs and Richard Meltzer, Smith was part of the show. A captivating character, she was obsessed with music, personalities and poetry. She wrote with vehemence, as if all the demons of hell were grabbing at her heels, as if the salvation of her immortal soul—and ours—depended on it. Smith was one of the few girls allowed into the rock 'n' roll writers' Boys Club, along with the nearly forgotten rock-girl writer-pioneer Jaan Uhelski and the late Lillian Roxon.

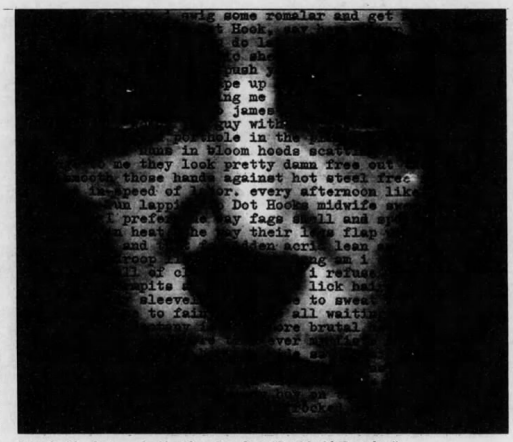
Around 1975, at City Lights bookstore in San Francisco, I picked up two slim (each less than 50 pages) volumes of poetry by Smith: "Witt" and "Seventh Heaven." These books have traveled with me all over the world and through all of my own incarnations since—from early punk rocker to unhappy housewife to college professor. Twenty-three years later, I'd grab them first if my house were to catch fire. Photos on the cover of each book portray a compelling and sexually ambiguous creature, a young Smith, the fierce girl-boy outlaw of poetry and rock 'n' roll. The work was, if not ahead of its time, right at the most cutting edge.

Smith spun passionate, rhythmic tales of longing, betrayal, love, loss and antiheroism, which were sprinkled liberally with her unabashed fandom, her veneration and salutation of artistic and cultural genius. Sometimes the work makes up with enthusiasm what it lacks in craft. Smith's trademark wordplay runs throughout that early work. Figures as disparate as Edie Sedgwick, Georgia O'Keeffe, Carole Lombard, Brian Jones, Anita Pallenberg, Mark Rothko and Arthur Rimbaud waft through the pieces. At the beginning of "Witt," in an introductory rant titled "Notice," Smith declares:

"These ravings, observations, etc. come from one who, beyond vows, is without mother, gender, or country, who attempts to bleed from the word a system, a space base, no rock island but a body of phrases with all the promise of top soil or a star. a core: a center that will hold, blossom and vein the atmosphere with vascular tissue beams that illuminate and reveal."

The foolhardy bravado of youth? Perhaps, but a promise that Smith seems to have done her best to honor during subsequent years. One never gets the feeling that she has ever done anything so much as remain true to her own blazingly personal vision—a path whose foundation is built on the utter force of her convictions and a belief in her ideas, her words, her heroes, creating a mix that happens to be absolutely spellbinding.

Nicole Panter is the author of "Mr. Right On & Other Stories" and the editor of the anthology "Unnatural Disasters; Recent Writings From the Golden State." She managed a band the Germs from 1977 to 1980.



Patty Smith, photographed by Oliver Ray; from "Patti Smith Complete"

Smith first appeared in New York out of working-class New Jersey in the late '60s, a refugee from a teacher's college looking to live an artist's life in Chelsea with her then-boyfriend, photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. They hung around the periphery of Warhol's Factory scene, hoping fruitlessly to be noticed and turned into Superstars. They buzzed around another epicenter of early '70s underground culture, Max's Kansas City, night after night, having been refused admission there too. Smith and Mapplethorpe eventually won acceptance through sheer persistence and talent.

Lee Childers, a photographer of that demimonde, recalled in "Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk" by Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain (Grove Press, 1996) that Smith and Mapplethorpe would be turned away from Max's for having the wrong "look" but, instead of shrinking off into the night, would resolutely plant themselves on the curb outside the club "and talk to everyone as they came and went. . . . I admired Patti's guts to sit there and say, 'This is where I want to go, and if they don't let me in, I'm just going to sit out front.' It was a very punk attitude way before there was a punk attitude."

During that period, Smith was exploring, still trying to find her metier, and was pursuing painting. Eventually, Mapplethorpe's emerging homosexuality fractured their intimate relationship, which became familial. Smith moved on, became famously involved first with the bad-boy poet Jim Carroll, then with playwright Sam Shepard, then musician Todd Rundgren. Likewise, Smith turned from painting to writing—initially for the rock magazines, a natural move given her great affinity for music and musicians. She was the first to overtly connect the pop culture-outlaw dots between Keith Richards, Jean Genet and Françoise Villon; Sam Shepard and Arthur Rimbaud; Joan of Arc and Marianne Faithfull and to then make these connections part of what she wrote about.

Smith, by all accounts, has always been a walking fan club for outlaw-heroes. In "Please Kill Me," Penny Arcade, a New York performance artist, tells of Smith's hysteria the night Rolling Stone Brian Jones died: "It was like she was involved with these people, but it was all in her head. Other people have imaginary playmates, but Patti had imaginary playmates who were Keith Richards and people like that."

Smith, a voracious self-educator, progressed from rock writing to poetry, publishing three books, four broadsides and a play, "Cowboy Mouth," co-written with Shepard, before 1973. For someone so beguiled by rock 'n' roll, it wasn't a great leap to add a guitar to a poetry reading. From there, a full rock band followed. Smith has never been a great singer; her voice is often flat, yelpy and off-key but is, nevertheless, unique. At the time, when she performed, she was so possessed by the gravity of what she was doing that it was nearly impossible not to be moved and enthralled. To have seen Smith play then was to have observed nothing less than the performer having a genuine out-of-body experience. Even on a rare bad night, the performances were legendarily transcendent. Word got out, crowds followed, and the rest is rock 'n' roll history.

Smith's here-I-am attitude and her performer-as-amateur-fan precept became the cornerstone of what would shortly evolve into punk rock. Punk rock itself turned out to be the gift that keeps giving, one of the last great and most creatively juicy, longest-running youth subcultures to occur in the second half of the 20th century. Yet just as the world was catching on to the movement to which she had helped give birth, Smith fell in love with MC5 member Fred "Sonic" Smith and, in 1979, announced her Garbo walk away from it all to become a suburban housewife. With the exception of a brief surfacing in 1988 to release "Dream of Life," for nearly 16 years she did stay away. While others copped her licks, making money in an MTV world early punk rock hadn't foreseen, Smith remained in exile, a content domestic goddess with two children and a husband to take care of.

But change came in the mid-'90s. Mapplethorpe, Todd Smith (Smith's brother) and her husband all died within five years of one another. Grief-stricken and with a family to support, Smith ended her retirement. The announcement of her return in 1996 was greeted by her fans with a mixture of joy, curiosity and trepidation; after all, it has been the fate of punk stalwarts like X, who were once L.A. hometown heroes, to have transformed themselves into a punk rock Sha Na Na with endless "reunion" shows, soulless burlesques, counter to the original "we're-not-in-it-for-the-money" spirit of punk rock.

Fears were quickly put to rest. Smith's comeback gigs were brilliant; all the fire and otherworldly possession were still there. Dynamic new work was presented along with the old, and Smith's presence served to remind anyone who saw her just how influential a performer and writer she had been. From Chrissy Hynde to Johnette Napolitano to P.J. Harvey to Courtney Love and even Jewel, there is hardly a single important female rock performer (or male performer for that matter) who can claim to have been untouched by Smith's work.

"Patti Smith Complete," recently issued in paperback, is a component of the resurrection of Smith. It's a big fat gorgeous valentine. The book is an engrossing hybrid: part autobiography, part retrospective of her writing and music career, part personal scrapbook complete with now-iconic images of Smith (many taken by Mapplethorpe). The book is filled with Smith family photos and snapshots of many of Smith's heroes, including Rimbaud, Bob Dylan, Genet and Jackson Pollock. There are also some surprises: Joining Smith's pantheon are Johnny Carson, a young Jacqueline Bouvier and Kurt Cobain.

Most of what is included are song lyrics, and it is difficult to read them without hearing the writer's physical voice, so dominant is her charisma. One wonders how interesting the book might be to someone unfamiliar with Smith's work and her voice. Smith provides the connective tissue: Entries from her journals introduce different sections of the work. It provides insight into Smith, the person: There is an odd formality, an almost Victorian stiffness in the language she employs, as if she is uncomfortable communicating with her audience without the armor of her lyrics or her poetry. For example:

"Easter arrived late in 1997. Peace and Noise near complete we took a holiday in Provincetown. We camped in a modest spot by the sea. It was my hope to lay work aside, to do nothing but dutifully love life and to contemplate the events in human history that led to the crucifixion and Christ revealing, at great cost, the process of his transfiguration. An Act one can barely comprehend in these scientific times."

"Patti Smith Complete" is not as complete as the title states. Rather, it is a fat and handsome volume, a well-chosen smorgasbord of her work: some religious imagery, a celebration of her heroes, rants, lyrics, drawings, a generous window to the artist's work, as overseen by the artist herself. Unfortunately, much of the unrestrained, early poetry untempered by age and sorrow is nowhere in evidence. Smith is still vital as a writer and musician, however, and even her failures and throwaways are far more compelling than most other artists' first-string output. ■

Copyright © 2024 Newspapers.com. All Rights Reserved.

Powered by Newspapers.com